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REMY OLLIER, MAURITIAN JOURNALIST AND PATRIOT¹

It is of interest to the Negro to know the patriots of the race who have blazed the path of social progress in the various lands in which their lots have been cast. Not to all men is it given to be great as the world counts greatness. Each of us, however, may have a task which, if well done, may leave its impress upon the life of the community in which we live. These, although obscure, efforts of the talented and persevering are the monuments which silently mark the progress of the race. Remy Ollier was one of these obscure personalities; but yet, a man whose career made such contributions to the life of Mauritius that he is regarded by its people as one of the great figures in its political history. He was an educator, a journalist, a patriot, and in some respects a liberator of his people.

Mauritius is an island under British control situated in the Indian Ocean. It is 550 miles east of Madagascar, which lies off the east coast of Africa. Under the control of the French, it was known as Ile de France. It is mountainous in character and its scenery is most beautiful and picturesque. Its inhabitants may be divided into two main divisions: Europeans, chiefly French and British; and African and Asiatic peoples. French appears to be more commonly spoken than English, which accounts for the fact that the writings of Remy Ollier were in French.

¹ This sketch is drawn largely from a pamphlet, presented to the Association for the study of Negro Life and History by the author A. F. Fokeer. The author states that he has not had access to all the material which he desired to use, for when he applied to the municipality for one of the books concerning Ollier, he received an answer stating "that books written by Mauritians, and published in the colony are by no means to be lent to anybody." Therefore, the source from which most of our information is secured is *A Biographical Sketch of the Life, Work and Character of Remy Ollier* by A. F. Fokeer, published by the General Printing and Stationery Cy. Ltd., 23 Church Street, Mauritius. 1917.

The island was discovered by the Portuguese navigator, Mascarenhas in 1505. Until the sixteenth century the island remained under the control of Portugal. In 1598, the Dutch seized it and named it "Mauritius" in honor of its stadholder, Count Maurice of Nassau. The Dutch built a fort there, introduced slaves and convicts, but they made no permanent settlements and, in 1710, it was abandoned. For a short time the island passed into the hands of the French East India Company, and later it became a crown colony. During the colonial wars between France and Great Britain, Mauritius was a source of much conflict. It was finally captured by the British in 1810; and by the Treaty of Paris in 1814, the British were definitely granted control of the island. Great Britain agreed, however, that the inhabitants should retain their own laws, customs, religion and language, all of which were of French origin.

In 1833 slavery was abolished in the British possessions. The Reformed Parliament forced by the denunciation of antislavery orators led by William Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson, and Granville Sharp, enacted a bill providing that Negro slavery should gradually cease in the colonies, and that a compensation of £20,000,000 should be paid to the slaveholders. There were then enacted laws removing proscription and the Negroes were supposed to enjoy the same political rights as the whites; but the latter sought to make themselves the dominant element in Mauritius. In 1834 there were about 66,000 Negroes on the island, which ten years later had a population of 158,462.² Indian coolies were brought in to take the place of Negro slaves and many evils attended their introduction. The situation was then as it was later in the United States when the adjustment of freedmen to their new life was accompanied by painful experiences on the part of both freedmen and their former masters. The planters resented the presence of the freedmen and as far as possible their privileges were curtailed.³

² Earlier figures are not available.

³ General information concerning the island may be obtained from the fol-

Militant agitators arose then among the Negroes demanding justice for the oppressed. Among these leaders thus promoting the march of the Negro population of Mauritius toward freedom were Adrien d'Epinay, whose prominence is attested by a monument to be erected in his memory, and Remy Ollier, who still lives in the hearts of his countrymen.

Remy Ollier was born at Grand Port on the island of Mauritius, October 16, 1816, six years after the conquest of the island by the English. He was the fourth child of Benoit Ollier, an artillery officer. His mother, J. Guillemeau, was a daughter of Dr. Guillemeau, a physician, and formerly a member of the Legislative Council of the island. When eight years of age, Ollier was sent to a private school taught by Captain Rault, a seaman who had served under Louis XVI. This work was supplemented by lessons every Saturday under the Reverend Father Rock, who was impressed with the boy's ability, and with the consent of his parents taught him the elements of English and Latin. Allowed to use the library of Mr. Rault, Ollier early became acquainted with the best literature. It is said that he had a very retentive memory and that he could repeat and write at will long passages from his favorite authors.

About 1832, an unexpected reverse in fortune reduced Ollier's father to abject poverty, and he died of a broken heart. Ollier, now scarcely sixteen, went to work as a clerk in a merchant's office; but his mother, thinking that his future in a clerkship was limited, secured him a place as an apprentice to a harness-maker. With a book in one hand and an awl in the other, Ollier prepared himself for his future career. Opportunities in the larger fields of life were closed to the Negro population as stated in the words

lowing: Martin, *The British Possessions in Africa*, Vol. IV.; Unienville, *Statistique de l'île Maurice et ses dépendances*; Epinay, *Renseignements pour servir à l'histoire de l'île de France*; Decotter, *Géographie de Maurice et de ses dépendances*; Chalmers, *A History of Currency in the British Colonies*; Anderson, *The Sugar Industry of Mauritius*; Keller, *Madagascar, Mauritius, and other East African Islands*; *The Mauritius Almanac*; *The Mauritius Civil Lists*; and *Annual Colonial Reports*.

of Ollier "that young men of the present generation could but become handicraftsmen. This is the only field open to us. But we must try to educate ourselves by all means; perseverance is the only key that opens the door to success. At whatever social rank man may be placed, education alone may confer upon him a superiority."

In 1833 there occurred an incident which proved to be a turning point in his life. Several members of the white population were charged with forming a conspiracy against British rule in the island. Rumor had it further that they had gathered arms and ammunition, that they expected to attack the British officials and restore the island to France. They were imprisoned and were denied the writ of habeas corpus. Young Ollier had developed a keen interest in politics and asked the permission of his employer to pay the men a visit. Later, he spent many of his working hours at the court trials to which he seemed irresistibly drawn. His employer wrote his mother stating that her son would never make a harness-maker; for he spent most of his time either in study when in the shop or at the courts when he should have been at work. His mother, whom he always loved, burned his books and reprimanded him for his conduct. For some time, he remained at the harness shop, but finally gave up the work in order to pursue the study he desired. Through his former friend, Mr. Rault, he obtained many books to replace the ones which he had lost by the hasty action of his mother.

By tutoring the children in the village of Petite Riviere and in the town of Port Louis, he managed to obtain a living. In 1837, he opened a private school in St. George street. It appears that this venture was not successful, for he soon accepted a position in a "boarding school conducted by Mr. Louis Barthelemy Raynaud, a white Mauritian Professor who did not scruple to teach the young generations of the white as well as of the colored population." When not engaged in tutoring at this school and the neighboring schools for young ladies, Ollier might be found devouring

books on metaphysics, morals, criticism and politics. He was asked by several private institutions to give lessons in English, French and Geography; but while teaching others, he himself was studying with Mr. H. N. D. Beyts, who twice filled the post of officer administering the government. Ollier continued his work as a teacher until 1839. At the end of the school year, prizes were distributed, and he had the pleasure of presenting a prize to Miss Louis Sidonie Ferret whom he married in December, 1840.

About a year before his marriage, he bought the school from Mr. Raynaud, with the idea of enlarging it according to his own plans; but this project failed for some unknown reason. He then undertook a trip to India, which seems to have been successful. On his return, he entered business, opening two large stores. His associate did not agree with him in his business plans and the business was dissolved by legal process. He then resumed his position as a teacher in the boarding schools. In 1841, he and his wife opened a school in the western suburb of Port Louis where the Negro population could bring their children for a liberal education upon the payment of a moderate fee. This helped him for a time to solve some of his financial problems but finally failed.

Ollier remained an insatiable reader. He took an active part in a literary club in Port Louis, *Le Société d'Emulation Intellectuelle*, and this association helped greatly to increase his knowledge of the literary world. He read literature, history, travels, philosophy, politics and such authors as Lamennais, Montesquieu, Diderot, Rousseau, Voltaire, Adam Smith, Horace Say, Ricardo and the like. He read not only because of his love of reading but because he was ambitious to prepare himself for larger duties. The largest duty as he seemed to see it was the freedom of his people from insult and injustice, and the recognition of his people upon the same level as other Mauritians. Before the edict of emancipation, the Legislative Council on June 22, 1829, had granted the free population of color the same civil

rights and privileges as other Mauritians possessed, but the local government had failed to carry out the enactment. Remy Ollier felt that this was a blot on the fair name of his country, as well as an affront to his people and longed to do his part in bringing about a change, which he believed could be effected by a newspaper.

An unusual incident translated into action his idea of founding a newspaper. Alexander Dumas had written a play entitled "Anthony," which is composed especially "to castigate morals by exposing vice in opposition to virtue." A contributor to one of the two papers, *Le Mauricien*, attacked the production of the play, and held up to ridicule the police authorities, who were supposed to be vested with censorial powers. He also criticized the author as a Negro glorifying adultery. The Negroes of the island became indignant and several answers were evoked. Remy Ollier presented a strong defense for Dumas. Another vigorous defense was prepared by Evénor Hitie, a writer of history. These articles were sent to the two papers of the island: *Le Cerneen* and *Le Mauricien*, both of which refused to publish them. An Englishman, Mr. Edward Baker, the owner of a printing plant, printed the two answers and circulated them in tract form.

The need of a newspaper became evident to the Negro population. In the time of Ollier, the press was used chiefly for political purposes rather than for the dissemination of information. Policies and parties were aided or hindered by the press, and this was its principal function. *Le Balance* had been the champion for the government and the rights of the weaker groups; but the editor, Mr. Berquin, was deported in 1833 because of utterances which were considered inimical to the policies of the colonial government. Since 1833, there had been no paper to champion the rights of the Negroes.

After the publication of the answers to the contributor of *Le Mauricien*, certain influential members of the Negro population, among whom was Remy Ollier, called to see

Sir Lionel Smith, G.C.B., Baronet and Governor of the island of Mauritius. It is said that they were warmly received, and that he was astonished to learn that the Negroes, a majority of whom were "the equals of the whites by their stature, by their hearts and their intelligence," had no paper "to make known their wishes and their complaints." He advised his hearers to start a paper, and he promised to support their reasonable demands. But, dying in 1842, Sir Lionel Smith was unable to give any assistance to the new publication.

Through the assistance of Mr. Edward Baker, the printer, the paper *Le Sentinelle de Maurice* was started. The prospectus, written in French and in English appeared March 21, 1843, and on Saturday, April 8, the first number of the paper came from the press. It was a weekly publication with Ollier and Baker as the editors. The former wrote articles in French and the latter in English, the articles of each being admirably written. Each one in his own sphere spoke with great vehemence and elevation of mind for the cause of "liberty and justice." The paper was read with avidity by the middle and lower classes, and the Negroes soon regarded Ollier as their champion.

The first and most important fight which Ollier felt called upon to enter was the nomination by the Governor of members to the Legislative Council in June, 1843. Ollier noticed that no Negro member was nominated. The vacant seat was given to a white representative, Mr. Forster. Ollier observed "that although a white man whose heart is right and whose intentions are pure can represent the population of color," yet he considered the appointment "as an act that was unjust, impolitic, undemocratic and unconstitutional." He added in explanation that the act was unjust "because all the children of the mother-country, the white colonists especially, were already represented in the Council, except the men of color, whose number is twice that of other populations of the country; their destiny more illustrious, and the high state of their experience, their educa-

tion, their intelligence and their morals are the same as with others; impolitic, because it discontents and disheartens the loyal and faithful British subjects and might alienate from the government the hearts of those who have invariably remained attached to it; undemocratic, and unconstitutional because the British constitution makes no exception of any person, and because it desires that all its subjects should have an equal part in its benefits."

In 1843, Ollier determined to have his paper appear three times a week, and for this purpose he bought the printing plant of *La Balance*, the paper which had been forced to suspend its publication ten years before. On the top of the first page of the paper, the royal arms of Great Britain were placed with the motto "Honi soit qui mal y pense! Dieu et mon droit!" He dedicated the paper to a strict vigilance over the abuse of power, "to redress the grievances of the weak and to encourage merit in all classes, creed or color." Those who now assisted him in the editorial work besides Mr. Baker, who edited the English page, were his wife, Emile Sandapa, and Emile Bouchet, a lawyer, who later defended Ollier when he was sued for libel. His editorials framed in animating language aroused his countrymen from their inaction and awakened in them new hopes and aspirations.

Ollier again attacked the government and the party in power, because no place was made for the Negro element in its civil service. In the first issue of *La Sentinelle*, he wrote, "From day to day the Maurician Press develops a system entirely dangerous and which seems to have this for a foundation—to discredit and debase English institutions and the English Government in the eyes of all. Here are the consequences of this system—the government believing that the opinions of the press are those of all the inhabitants of Maurice, has seen in us enemies rather than loyal and faithful subjects, whence this continual defiance which has driven up to now the people of color from all the public employment. . . . The organs of this country are all in ac-

cord in saying that the government of the United Kingdom is pernicious to us, that it long since desires and plans our ruin; and when our riches and our prosperity proclaim openly the falseness of these allegations, they wish that England, who makes possible this well-being for us, may not have a deep indignation against those who do not have even enough generosity to recognize the benefits of their mother-country. . . . As for us, our mission is to call all parties of our population to a united intelligence. . . .” On October 22, 1844, he exclaimed, regarding racial distinctions: “Education levels everything. An erudite man in any class is equal to any other man having the same degree of education; he is a demi-god and is superior to kings, when the latter are immersed in the darkness of ignorance.”

Ollier continued the attacks upon the government because of its discrimination against its citizens of color and yet he remained a lover of his country. Not only did he agitate through the columns of paper, but also through other available channels. In 1843, he drafted a petition to which many signatures were attached and sent it to Queen Victoria. This action has been called the death-blow to the monopoly of the local parliament by the white population. The petition was:

“May it please your Majesty,—On various occasions the British Throne has been approached by individual members or collective bodies of the Mauritius community in the exercise of that inestimable privilege of your Majesty’s faithful subjects, the right of petition; but hitherto, never has any prayer of the great majority of your Majesty’s loyal and attached subjects in this island been thus presented to your Majesty’s attention.

“The colored classes of Mauritius, comprising a population of about 70,000, and including at least one third of the island’s wealth and intelligence, although not deprived of any political right by the fundamental laws of the British realm, or by any act of Your Majesty’s Parliament, actually enjoy but few privileges of British subjects; and can scarcely be said to have a political existence in the affairs of their native island.

“Your Majesty’s petitioners will refer to the fact of no individual of the coloured classes having a seat in the Council of Government; notwithstanding that there are many in the island in every respect qualified by riches, talents, education, and moral character, to occupy a place in that assembly.

“Whilst therefore gratefully recognizing the equity and impartiality of the British laws and institutions, in which alone repose their best hopes for themselves and their children, your Majesty’s petitioners humbly and reverently approach Your Imperial Throne with the prayer that, His Excellency the Governor of Mauritius may be authorized to call to his council one or more representatives of the people of colour in this island; or otherwise to grant to the country the privilege of electing its own representatives. Your Majesty’s petitioners will only add the sincere declaration of their loyal and patriotic attachment to Your Majesty’s person and Throne and Government; and your petitioners will ever pray.”

In 1843, the editor of *Le Cerneen*, the oldest newspaper in the colony, was prosecuted, fined and imprisoned for publishing a defamatory article against the magistrate of Port Louis. Ollier had always advocated the freedom of the press, and he protested against the law which suppressed free speech, and against the persecution of a fellow-journalist, although the latter was his political enemy. Ollier’s biographer adds: “Ollier indeed was an ardent lover and a good hater. This noble heart and comprehensive mind made him understand his duty toward men. He forgot enmity when fundamental principles were not adequately observed.”

In 1844, there was established a rival newspaper, *l’Esprit Public*, to combat the policies of Remy Ollier. It was edited by Mr. Bruils, who had been educated in Europe as a lawyer. He began by finding fault with the style and grammatical form of Ollier’s writing, but it is said that the subject-matter of his editorials could be rarely attacked. Ollier’s writings were always hasty and he rarely took the time to polish them, while Bruil’s style was more smooth and uniform. Ollier’s style, however, was easy and original.

He replied effectively to the invective of his enemies in prose and in verse. He seems to have had no difficulty in the composition of his sentences nor did he take the pains which would seem to be necessary for the average man to acquire the finished journalistic style. His motto was as he wrote a page "une feuille lue aujourd'hui, oubliée demain." Therefore, he gave his copies to the compositors without rereading them. Concerning the correctness of his writings, his biographer writes: "Like Carlyle, Shelly, Bossuet, Mirabeau and Moliere, the editor of *La Sentinelle* perpetrated many a small sin against the rules of grammar and certainly paid but a halting attention to the nice distinctions of punctuation. He very often did not know where to end a paragraph and begin another. On the whole, he is happily not obscure." His main effort was to state his idea and when he had made his statement, he was not as careful as he should have been regarding the construction of the statement. He consoled himself with the words, "Grammar is of man; the idea is of God."

His enemies, however, could not say that he was trying to overthrow the empire, for he was merely struggling for the liberty guaranteed by the empire. "In all the British Empire," said he, "there are no subjects more loyal than we. We are English today, we are not a conquered people, we are English people." He was convinced that if England would give the rights of Englishmen to the Mauritians, she would find them "as devoted as any children she could count in her bosom." He added, however, "We belong to England. Why do we not possess the institutions of England? If she wishes to make us love our nationality, to endow our island with that which makes for the glory of our mother-country; this, we shall not be able to know or appreciate if we are strangers to all that which makes it cherish its children and respect its people! At the sight of our institutions, in the presence of the happenings in Mauritius, advancements ruined, individual liberty violated, human life despised, one cannot believe that we be-

long to an English administration, and that we are a part of the most democratic people in the world.”

It was agitation of this type which brought about what may be considered the definite contributions of Remy Ollier to Mauritian life: the creation of the Municipality, the Chambers of Commerce and Agriculture, the opening of credits to the Negroes by the Mauritian Commercial Bank, the reforms at the Royal College respecting the English Scholarships, and the employment of men of color in the departments of the government. His attacks upon capital punishment and barbarous prison treatment resulted in laws which mitigated the former harsh conditions, and his criticism of the banking institutions in the crisis of 1843 led to considerable reform in that quarter. His bitter attacks on political and social conditions made many enemies. One evening, he was waylaid by several assailants and given a whipping. He was imprisoned, but he wrote in prison as well as elsewhere.

His political activity was short, for in the early part of 1845, about two years after his appearance in journalism, he died at the early age of 28 years, after a short illness due to an inflammation of the intestines. Stoically he bore the bitter effects of his courageous utterances; and when death came to him after only a short period of endeavor, both in the interests of his own people, and also of the weaker classes of all groups, the success of his efforts had just begun to appear. The name of Remy Ollier in Mauritian history, therefore, symbolizes perseverance in the face of great obstacles, agitation as an instrument of social progress, patriotism as it relates to the island of Mauritius, and justice respecting all classes and races. In 1916, the centenary of his birth was celebrated in Port Louis. Then it was that the city and island demonstrated its love and gratitude for Ollier, because of the services which he rendered the colony in general and the population of color in particular. Remy Ollier was one of the unknown leaders in the cause of freedom.